

# Embracing Technology with e-Portfolios

by Libby Brunette

Last year we began the process of moving to electronic portfolios for our program. Technology can sometimes be a frightening tool for early childhood educators, but we can use it to our advantage as well. Our journey toward embracing technology for our portfolios was one of triumphs and obstacles.

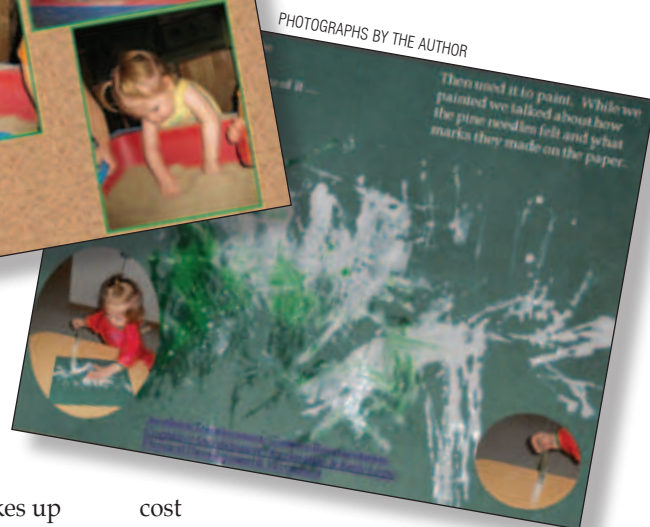
## Why e-Portfolios?

My daughter's developmental portfolio from her preschool and kindergarten experience is a three-inch thick binder sitting on a shelf in our home collecting dust. As an early childhood educator, I truly appreciate the evidence of her development, the work invested by her teachers, and the growth that took place during that time. However, as a person who values the environment, and a cheapskate at heart, I am discouraged that each child in our program has one of these at home. Inside these time capsules are plenty of photographs, using gallons of ink from printers, gobs



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of paper, and the plastic that makes up the binder. It is also fragile: the artwork is easily ripped out, the photos are easily bent, which makes it impractical for my daughter to revisit her experiences on a regular basis. All of this led me to consider electronic portfolios in our program last year.

We all recognize the need for proper assessment of children's development. Assessment tools help us understand children's growth and development, inform teaching practices, improve program quality, and identify outcomes. When a program has an outside funding source, this is more than 'nice'; it is imperative. Finding a way to document children's learning in a cost-effective, efficient manner is helpful to teachers and administrators. Electronic portfolios provide this.

When *Focused Portfolios* was published in 2001, authors Gronlund and Engel suggested the use of digital cameras, but cautioned about the cost. Ten years later, most early childhood classrooms have a digital camera. Families have been very generous in giving us their cameras when they upgrade. In this way, we've been the fortunate recipients of some high-quality cameras that were only slightly used by families. All we had to do was ask in our newsletter! The lower

cost of technology has made its use no longer a "What if?" but more of a "Why not?"

## Moving to e-Portfolios

This is not to say that our process was without challenges. Our first challenge was to purchase the software for our classrooms. We wanted software that would allow us to display a number of things: photographs, anecdotal observations, artwork, and descriptions of developmental domains. We opted to use PowerPoint, not only for its versatility, but for its user-friendly format. This was an expense, but not an unreasonable one. (We were able to obtain three-user licensed versions of Microsoft® Student Office, which includes PowerPoint, for around \$100 on [newegg.com](http://newegg.com). This site varies in its sales, so keep an eye out for deals.) Next we had to train our staff who weren't familiar with PowerPoint. To do this, we paired some of our more computer-savvy staff with staff who needed help. For most of our staff, the learning curve was not too steep. Unfortunately, we learned the hard way that backing up our work was an absolute necessity. Debbie Saulnier, one of our kindergarten teachers remembers, "I learned quickly to back up my work

in more than one place. The electronic portfolio slides are time-consuming to create, so I didn't want to redo my work unnecessarily." Fortunately, this was learned early on in the process, so rebuilding the lost work wasn't too daunting. We now have back-ups on USB, hard disk, and on CD. Lisha Colby, one of our newer teachers, explained her process: "The challenges for me were learning what works best for me, how I place my photos, and how to do the write-up. I had to find my own way."

We also started with an expectation that each child would have a minimum of four entries per month in their portfolios. While this doesn't seem like a lot, teachers ran into sticking points with children's part-time schedules; children who only attend two days per week obviously do not have the same opportunity to be observed as children enrolled full time. This challenge alone forced the teachers to focus their attention on those children who attended part time. Now that our staff has been at this for two years, their ability to conduct anecdotal observations on children has improved. Each teacher has developed her own system for gathering observations that is as unique as they are. Some have checklists, others take many photographs, still others write anecdotes on a notepad to transfer to the portfolio later. There is no right or wrong way to manage the information, as long as the picture of the whole child is evident in the portfolio.

## Getting Staff on Board

Staff's initial responses to e-portfolios varied from hesitant, to excited, to terrified, depending on their comfort level with computers. As one staff member said, "The initial transition from the paper portfolios to the electronic portfolios was a bit overwhelming." Having had portfolios in our program for a few years, they all understood the value of these artifacts for children, families, and for themselves as educators. That was

one step in the right direction. Now I had to convince everyone that this new method would be better in the long run, if not immediately. One of our teachers described the process of getting on board:

"When our director approached our staff about changing our paper portfolios to electronic portfolios I was very apprehensive. I was a little uneasy thinking about having to use a program that I was not familiar with and the threat of losing the profile because it was only on a small flash drive. During a staff meeting the Director explained to us, in depth, the program we would be using (PowerPoint) and also her expectations of what would be in the profiles. She also was prepared to give everyone a copy of the skeleton portfolio so that we could use this as a guide. We were told to go and practice with the program. Staff showed each other new things they had discovered and easier ways to create the portfolio. I became very excited! There were so many options to add and I could tailor them based on the individual child. All I needed was the computer, my flash drive, and maybe a power cord. This is nothing like the paper, glue stick, markers, and stickers that you needed before. Now, I could not imagine doing the portfolios any other way. It is so easy and fun to do. I am always finding a new way to create a page that will not only document the children's learning, but also the families are more excited to read and understand what we are actually doing with their children during their time with us." — Melissa Vaccaro

## Benefits

The benefits of electronic portfolios are abundant:

- No need to print photographs — using expensive photo paper and ink.
- No need to use paper to document; it is all on the computer!
- Scanning artwork maintains its quality and allows families to view the real

artwork immediately.

- Storage is no longer an issue since it is all on the hard drive.
- The process is clean — no snips of paper, no glue, no spilling your cup of coffee on it and ruining it.
- Portfolios can be shared by the family with others across the country or around the world through email or by posting on a blog or social networking site.

Some of the essential components of successful portfolio development (electronic or otherwise) are time, professionalism, and intentionality. This is true not only for portfolio development, but for the program as a whole. In terms of time, our teachers take an hour per week for 'Assessment Time.' This time is used to observe children, document, or organize their documentation into their assessment tools. They also have 2½ hours per week of 'Planning Time.' This can be used for any number of professional activities including curriculum development, assessment, observation, and general planning.

Professionalism is evident in the teachers' desire to portray themselves as the professionals they are. Cooperating with a colleague to proofread what is sent home to a family is paramount. The teachers take the portfolios seriously because the program takes them seriously. By providing the necessary time and equipment to do this job and do it well, we send a clear message that this is an important aspect of their teaching. The teachers have to know children's development and what pieces of evidence support that. The program relies on their professionalism.

The teachers are intentional about gathering information for the portfolio, and the portfolio, in turn, helps them to increase their intentionality. As with any portfolio, the electronic portfolio is a valuable tool to help teachers identify areas in the classroom, or specific children,

who are in need of special attention. When teachers are given time to reflect on the children's development in this way, it becomes evident very quickly, if little evidence is available for a particular developmental domain. This observation prompts the teacher to evaluate why this is the case: Is the child stronger in one domain over another (for example, physical development vs. social-emotional development)? Or is it that the teacher is stronger in one domain over another? We all have our own biases and these are present in our classrooms.

The portfolio helps us to identify these and then make the necessary adjustments to balance our curriculum. For a child, it will also become evident if a child's progress in one domain is lacking in much the same way that observations highlight this for teachers. A teacher who sees that he has no evidence of a child's social-emotional development, for example, will most certainly be on the look-out for that in the coming month. When he discovers that the child is frequently in solitary play, he can then adjust his curriculum to foster the social aspect of the child's development.

## Structure of Our e-Portfolios

We based our portfolios on the *New Hampshire Early Learning Guidelines*



PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR



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(State of New Hampshire, 2005) in order to ensure all developmental domains were included: Physical Development, Social-Emotional Development, Approaches to Learning, Creative Expression / Aesthetic Development, Communication and Literacy Development, Health and Safety, and Cognitive Development. While most of our classrooms arrange their electronic portfolios by month, each artifact within the portfolio is hyperlinked to the appropriate developmental domain so that it's clear how the child is developing within each domain. This is a particularly nice feature about creating the portfolio electronically. It helps us to share information with families about their children's development and to validate our work as professionals who adhere to certain guidelines.

## Looking Back and Moving Forward

Upon reflection, I recognize that electronic portfolios portray the field of Early Care and Education as professional and competent. Our families are truly impressed by the depth of the staff's general knowledge, as well as their knowledge of individual children. The families appreciate the portfolios as tools they can use to share their child's growth with others. One mom said to me that she appreciated knowing that she could get her child's portfolio on a jump-drive and share

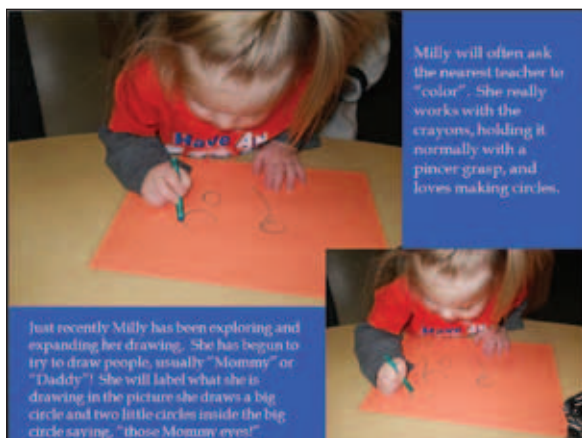
it with relatives around the country. Another family said, "We have only experienced the electronic version and we really like them. I especially like the photos; in fact, we usually end up skimming over the text of the portfolio because we spend all our time talking about other topics. During this round of conferences, I was planning to ask if they were able to email us the PowerPoint. That would be a big plus since we have some faraway family who would love to see it."

## Summing Up

Our staff are now willing and able to tackle the challenge of e-portfolios. One of my most senior staff, who was challenged by the computer, said to me recently, "I'm glad you made me do [the electronic portfolios]; I learned a lot in the process. It forced me to learn something that I wouldn't have otherwise." Our children have a living, breathing document that they can easily revisit to evaluate and assess their own growth. As one child stated, "Remember when we went on that [field trip] and we were so scared?" Another child said, "That's my worm! I was an expert!" as she viewed a photo of herself in the garden. The children enjoy viewing each other's portfolios as well. One child was viewing some artwork that a friend had included entitled, "Friends." He said, "If she did that now, I'm sure it would include me!"

Moving forward in our use of electronic portfolios, I envision families contributing their own photographs and anecdotes about their children. The family's goals for the child are already a part of the partnership in our program, but an increased sense of ownership over the electronic portfolio would be ideal. I envision families emailing photos with descriptions to the teachers, as well

as stories of their special events at home and family traditions. As Kay Stritzel Rencken (1996) so eloquently writes, "It is a personal story that each shares with the other and is often done with laughter, concern, caring, and love." Although the electronic portfolio may appear less personal, by its very nature, families actually feel more connected when they view them and realize that their children are truly loved and cared for each and every day by the teachers in the program.



## References

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